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Opening Plenary Address

What Remains and What Sustains: Companions in Mission, Colleagues in Action, WPAs for Life

Elizabeth Boquet

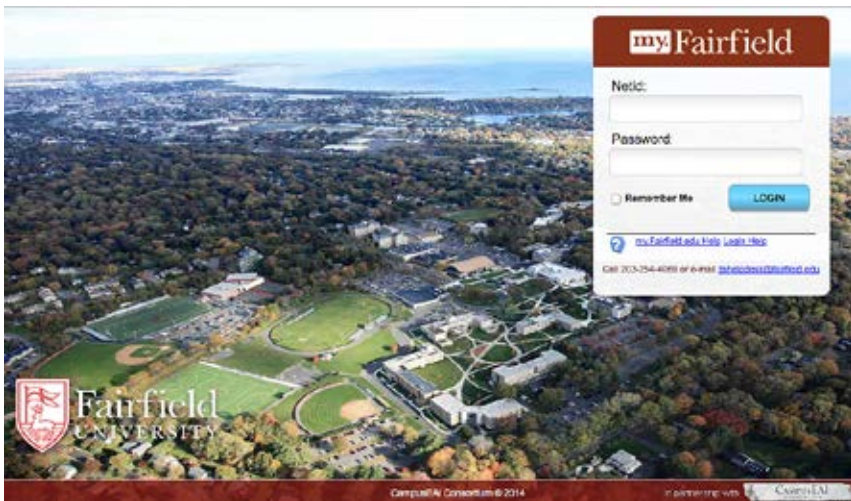
In a small conference room on the Keene State University campus in the winter of 2000, I sat with the other Northeast Writing Centers Association executive committee members planning our spring conference. Decisions needed to be made about the keynote address. Our speaker was set, but the time was up for grabs. Traditionally, the keynote had been given first thing in the morning, as people gathered their muffins and spooned out their fruit salad and filled their coffee cups, but attendance in the early morning the previous few years had been sparse. We considered moving the keynote address to lunch, to ensure a full house. But Bob Connors was adamant: “The keynote strikes the key note. That’s why it’s called a keynote.”

For those who didn’t know Bob or who don’t know his work, his was a formidable presence: a big burly guy with a full beard and a booming voice, a scholar astride a Harley who loved to construct things: sentences, histories, mantels for his southern New Hampshire home. He was forty-eight—my age now—when a motorcycle accident took his life only a few months later, on an early summer day. Of all of Bob’s work, and there is a lot of it, this is what I most remember: “The keynote strikes the key note.” So much so that, when I sit down to write an address like this one, I think first and again of Bob.

In this article, I take up the call, issued most recently by Steve Parks in the *College Composition and Communication* review essay “Sponsors and Activists: Deborah Brandt, Sponsorship, and the Work to Come,” for those of us who teach about and research literacy sponsorship in its many and varied forms to tell our own sponsorship stories. To do so, I offer a snapshot of my own institutional literacy autobiography to reflect on how literacy sponsorship, a concept that has animated a large segment of rhetoric

and composition over the past several decades, operates in our own professional lives.

Literacy sponsors, as Brandt defined them in *Literacy in American Lives*, “are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (19). I have appreciated the opportunity, afforded by the theme for the CWPA conference, to think about who and what sustains us across time in doing the work our institutions call on us to do (and sometimes the work they’d rather we not do, which is also part of it) and also, as my title suggests, to think about what remains of us—any of us, all of us—when we are gone, whether on a temporary or a permanent leave-taking. I regard my subtitle now, ten months after I first drafted it—“WPAs for Life”—and I wonder, in that tree-falls-in-a-forest kind-of-way, if a writing program administrator has no writing program to run, is she still a WPA?



My institutional literacy autobiography begins at, and centers on, Fairfield University, where I was hired as an assistant professor of English and director of the writing center in the fall of 1993. Fairfield is a comprehensive Jesuit Catholic university with approximately 3200 undergraduate and 1500 graduate students enrolled in its five schools. It is located in Fairfield, CT, right along Long Island Sound, between New York City and Bridgeport.

The photos accompanying this text were shot on Fairfield’s campus, in a project inspired by contemporary photographer Sally Mann. Mann’s work revolves, in one way or another, around questions of mortality. Her series *What Remains*, for example, followed from the murder of a fugitive

who was tracked onto her family's farm and killed. In this same series, she documents the decomposing body of her family's beloved greyhound, and she travels to a body farm at the University of Tennessee where researchers study human decomposition. Her series of landscapes of Civil War battlefields near her Virginia homestead highlights the return to nature of places that were once dramatically populated by bodies in contact and conflict.¹ Following Mann, I snapped these photos of unoccupied spaces precisely to call up the traces of those who have occupied them. While I refer to these spaces as unoccupied (in the sense that no one appears in the photos even though in many cases someone is currently assigned to the space), I see in my mind's eye an institutional landscape filled with people. I want to explore what it means to dwell deeply, as I have at Fairfield for these past twenty-two years, in one place, in many different roles, yet somehow always already a writing program administrator—because, while we might consider it a truism that “a person is not a program,” we would probably all like to imagine that our presence matters, has mattered, in the places where we devote so much of our lives.

“Who am I? Whose am I? Who am I called to be?” These three questions frame the Ignatian Residential College on Fairfield's campus. Students and their mentors work from these questions to examine their lives. I suppose I am asking a version of these questions now when I wonder, “What does it mean to have mattered? According to whom? In relation to what?”

My knowledge of the Jesuit tradition when I began at Fairfield was limited to the connections between critical pedagogies and liberation theology, with their shared commitments to what would be called “the preferential option for the poor.” The Jesuits sought—still seek—to empower communities through education by meeting people where they are and accompanying them as they agitate for change. I am fairly fluent in Ignatian-speak now, but when I arrived at Fairfield, I was largely unprepared for the institutional literacy learning curves that lay ahead those first few years. They were everywhere—from figuring out how to read (and write) minutes, how to follow (and make) motions, how to prepare applications and reports, how to read and respond to candidate materials, how to participate in faculty governance, how to make a successful tenure case by framing some of my administrative work as teaching, some as scholarship, very little as service. (It worked.) The list goes on and on. There was a lot to learn.



“Administrators come and go. But faculty remain.” That’s the counsel I received as I adjusted to my first new dean; and, in certain ways, it is true. Many administrators came, and they have gone, four or five times over. New administrators have come where once there were none. I remain.

Fairfield’s central administrators² are themselves concerned about the sustainability of our current model of operations, so much so that the subtitle of our developing strategic plan is, in fact, “Building a More Sustainable Future.” Faculty too are invested in the viability of the current model and support the goal of a more inclusive, more affordable college education, but few list the first sustainable principle for a university as “To build and implement a new business model that broadens our revenue streams and makes our costs more responsive to our articulated priorities” (“Fairfield 2020”). I encounter this language from our Fairfield 2020 strategic planning documents many times as I log into the system through which faculty performance is reviewed, and I realize: We cannot talk about sustainability without talking about faculty. We cannot talk about sustainability without talking *with* faculty. *Sustained merit* is, in fact, the original term for the default category in our faculty salary distribution system. The faculty sustain. I sit on the university’s merit review committee, with its official charge and its secure database and its appeals processes. I log in to the interface and marvel at colleagues who distill a year’s worth of teaching accomplishments into a 250-word text box. And then tab to the next text

box for research. And tab again for service. Sustained, sustained, sustained. All faculty are sustaining.



I served on and chaired the Faculty Salary Committee (FSC) when senior administrators, backed by the board of trustees, brought forward a merit pay proposal, which has since been implemented. That committee service stands as the steepest of the steep institutional literacy learning curves I have encountered during my time at Fairfield.

The five faculty on the FSC—during my term, one each from chemistry, political science, finance, math, and English—met at least weekly (and sometimes more often than that) to sift through the data the university’s administrative team would provide, identify gaps, figure out our questions, set the weekly meeting agenda, and review the various documents under consideration. We met to plan to meet with the administration’s representatives. We considered what to do with the information we had, what information we didn’t have but should, what information we were unlikely to get but needed to request anyway. As FSC chair, I prepared and gave the reports to the General Faculty, translating administrative positions for faculty and faculty positions for administrators. It was a familiar role.

When I recall my time on the FSC, I am reminded of Brandt’s account of the case of Dwayne Lowery, the line worker who becomes a union leader. Lowery’s early success in organizing and advocacy was sponsored

on the ground at his own workplace as well as through professional development opportunities. Eventually, however, the value of the literacy skills Lowery had been acquiring diminish in the face of increasing legalization and bureaucratization. I feel for him. Many days, I think he and I are the same. Brandt writes, “[I]nstitutions undergo change, affecting the kinds of literacy they promulgate and the status that such literacy has in the larger society” (56).

At Fairfield, we wound up with a three-tiered merit system: Additional Merit, a category that is almost never funded; No Merit, a category (which would be a 0% increase) that can rarely be justified; and the category into which nearly everyone would fall: Sustained Merit.

Still, not all faculty labor in sustainable positions at Fairfield as elsewhere; on my campus, we are working to ensure that conditions across labor categories converge. To the extent that this is happening, it is less because conditions are improving for part-time faculty and more because they are deteriorating for full-time faculty. Meanwhile, our documents dis-incentivize collective action. Though many express sympathy, dismay, anger, and shame at the working conditions for part-time faculty, part-time faculty on our campus, as on many campuses, remain woefully under-represented in critical discussions—discussions ranging from departmental business to curricular decisions to compensation negotiations—and our documents, along with the historical interpretations of those documents, compose their ongoing exclusion. Administrators view the governance process as slow, unwieldy, confusing. Faculty object to administrative invocation of extra-institutional bodies—benefits consultants, attorneys, “the state”—to justify ignoring, obstructing, or bypassing agreements codified in institutional documents to which faculty view all parties as bound.³ We bear witness to the decomposition of the texts on which the university was built.

Perhaps this shift is inevitable in an era in which documents are increasingly ephemeral, circulating on a network, landing in an inbox from the disembodied “universityannounce@” or “facultyannounce@” or from simply “Fairfield University” itself, disappearing with the click of a key. In an article entitled “To: You, From: Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert, Re: Literacy Demands and Institutional Autobiography,” Blitz and Hurlbert begin, “Just a reminder that the agenda for today’s meeting will be to find out what literacy demands are and to determine the extent to which they contribute to or constitute institutional autobiography” (7). They gather all the mail that arrives in their department mailboxes for a year and conclude: “The documents that ‘arrive’ . . . supply us with little histories in the form of decisions that we have had some/no part in making” (8).



Blitz and Hurlbert wrote this article in 1989. Since then, we have experienced a revolution in the means available to our institutions to compose us and our work. Our faces look out from various landing pages, log-in screens, and “sizzle sheets,” for all the world to see. These representations are rarely within our power to revise, adapt, or delete. Blitz and Hurlbert write of a “visible, audible, and hermetically Institutional Literacy . . . which speaks as a shifty subjectivity—shifty because it is both transient and tricky . . . Every literacy demand is, in other words, a minute and momentous pedagogy” (12).

Claude Mark Hurlbert was my dissertation director. This May marked twenty-one years since the sun-soaked day when he hooded me. Claude retired this year, and it is hard for me to believe that a whole career has passed in between then and now.

What I’m leaving out is this:

I spent seven years as a central administrator, working to advance Fairfield’s previous strategic plan, the one positioned now as in desperate need of a refresh. That plan was collaborative and student-centered. It privileged teaching and learning. It capitalized on what I would still argue are Fairfield’s “value propositions.” Though this work might now be viewed as stale, well past its due date, it feels achingly fresh to me.

As this new strategic plan comes into focus, I train my lens, Sally Mann-style, on the deterioration of various types of literacies that have been spon-

sored in, through, and by the institution. As Mann walked the perimeter of the body farm, so I travel the footpaths of my own campus, contemplating the composition of the soil. I walk down Bellarmine Road, up the hill on O'Neill Way, and around the corner of Fitzgerald, and I am called back to my first moments as a graduate student in a PhD program, as someone who, upon arrival, had one single disastrous year of college teaching as a master's student under her belt.



That year in my master's program began with three hours of professional development—a morning workshop for inexperienced teachers during which time a senior faculty member assured us “The good ones, you can't hurt; the bad ones, you can't help.” I remember feeling deflated by that statement, even as I tried to draw on its limited wisdom. I had no transferrable framework when faced with the literacy demands of teaching: constructing a syllabus, planning a unit, designing assignments, grading a set of papers, even maintaining a grade book. Every task seemed somehow free-floating in its own universe, and every need was pressing, not the least of which were the needs of students that appeared to be disconnected from the papers they were supposed to be writing but that somehow kept insinuating themselves into the work of our class: the student who threw a chair at one of his group members; the student who came to class repeatedly visibly beaten but certain she had “asked for it”; the student who went home

for Thanksgiving break, loaded his shotgun, put it in his mouth, and never came back.

I had taken home a lot of student writing over that Thanksgiving break, so I had nearly a complete writer's notebook of that student's experiences, right up until the week he killed himself. Soon, what had been an unremarkable, undifferentiated section of first-year writing was a topic of significant interest among various administrators. They wanted all of his writing. They wanted the syllabus, the assignments. They wanted to talk to me. Suddenly, everyone wanted to know what had been going on in my class.

What to say about the sponsors of my institutional literacies at that particular moment in my career, other than that I can't recall anyone expressing concern about how I was being constructed in this scenario, how my own entrance to the profession I had seemingly chosen was being configured by not only the terrible loss and the subsequent questions I had about what I might have legitimately noticed but also by the institutional gaze that was trained on me. I don't think faculty and administrators were wholly indifferent; I think that they too were wildly underprepared: "The good ones, you can't hurt; the bad ones, you can't help." Certainly I learned how powerful institutional documents could be, how they could stand (in) for (and against) individual institutional actors.

When I entered the doctoral program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, just shy of two years after that initial teaching experience, I knew shockingly little about the place. It felt more like I was entering an academic witness protection program. I leapt at the chance to flee all sorts of personal and professional complications and to tuck myself away in the Alleghenies until things cooled down, Harrison Ford-style. I arrived for a five-week summer session, and I stayed straight through for three years. I had no idea that a Politics of Composition seminar I took that first semester with Claude would afford me the space to think with others about the relationship of literacy to violence in its many, many forms. I was not ready then to talk about my initial teaching experiences, but I was more than ready to encounter the work of Elspeth Stuckey, of Mary Rose O'Reilley, of Richard Miller, of Claude himself and his then-frequent co-author Michael Blitz, whose work on violence in and around the writing classroom shocks and saddens me now still with its contemporary relevance.

I could not see myself then developing a bullet-proof syllabus, so to speak, and I cannot see myself now developing a bullet-proof writing program. Violence, and the call to respond to it with compassion, continues to compose much of my professional and personal life. I have spoken and written elsewhere on its most recent turns (see Boquet 2015) but I have not, until now, connected my current work to my first semester teaching, to the

sorrowful experience of that first troubled class. The questions of what matters are the questions of what sustains are the questions of what remains. From Mississippi to Western PA, from New Orleans to Bridgeport and back again. This summer, as I write, to Lafayette, LA, where my mom and dad used to go to the movies as a young married couple to escape the summer heat. To Charleston, SC, where my poetry project colleague and collaborator taught before moving with her husband and young sons to Newtown, Connecticut, six months before the shootings at Sandy Hook. To my own grown-up hometown of Milford, CT, where last year my husband, a local police officer, responded to a fatal stabbing in our neighborhood high school and where, more recently, one of his fellow officers killed himself on Father's Day. I set aside the drafting of this piece to attend the wake and the funeral, to accompany my husband who accompanied the casket from the funeral home to the church to the gravesite to inter the remains.



Fairfield University is, essentially, a gated community. No one passes through it on their way to anywhere else. A guard station marks the main entrance, and warning signs mark the others. The campus is, overall, impeccably manicured, with benches where you can sit beneath the willows that dip into the pond (as long as you don't feed the wildlife), stretch out on green grassy knolls (as long as you don't bring your dog), and explore the trails leading to the Zen garden (as long as you smile for the cameras and park only in designated areas). It seems that all institutional literacies should be similarly composed. We go *to* Bridgeport or Nicaragua or New Orleans or Tanzania, but we're not really supposed to carry those places back with us. When I return from a quiet afternoon of writing on campus,

my husband pulls up the *Fairfield Citizen*, a small local circular, and pushes it toward me. The headline reads “Cops: Man hangs self in woods near Fairfield U” and the final paragraph confirms: “Officers began to search the immediate area, including the woods on the university property. It was there they discovered the man’s body, hanging from a tree.”

People are in pain, in Newtown, yes, and in New Orleans, true, and in Nicaragua, certainly, but also on our own campuses. Right here in front of us. That pain presents a problem, as it insinuates itself into the perceived real work of the institution. Can we not acknowledge that our experiences with pain anywhere should render us more, not less, capable of responding to it everywhere? Compassion, it seems to me, is an infinitely renewable resource.

It is difficult to draw the connections, as I would like to, between violence in our communities, violence on the edges of our campuses, violence that makes its way into our classrooms, and the violence implicit in our institutions’ unwillingness to render visible the power they mask through the increasing disembodiment of our educational enterprise. We are experiencing the deterioration of the value of expertise and shifts in the value of academic literacies writ large and as they have been historically practiced. The central consolidation of power, the control of information along with the simultaneous denial that such practices are operative: These are contemporary literacy tests; we should make no mistake about that. I bristle at the mission creep of the term *sustainability*, as I have outlined it here.⁴ I have no language for bridging the distance between the ways that the term is deployed in my own institution’s documents, my understanding of my university’s core mission, and my felt sense of this term’s mattering in the world.

* * *

An email message with the subject line “To the General Faculty from the President” arrives. In it, the President informs the faculty that the FSC and the administration have reached agreement on compensation for the coming year. This is good news and, even though significant changes to health care coverage loom large, contract terms are relatively favorable. All faculty are sustaining.



The President's email message also announces that the Senior Leadership Team will be recommending changes to the process for determining salary and benefits. At the same time, the message undercuts the successful conclusion of this year's reasonably equitable compensation agreement by positioning salaries and benefits as an institutional problem to be solved. The President notes that salaries and benefits are the university's largest operating expense—65% of the annual budget—as though it were self-evident how concerning this figure should be. I learn, in the days that follow, that I am not the only person to read this figure and think, well, of course. What else would the university's largest operating expense be? What else *should* it be? What is the target percentage, and why? We are told that the current levels are unsustainable, but many of us wonder "What else is a university made of? What else matters?"

The President didn't anticipate any of these questions in the end-of-the-year remarks he gave to the General Faculty only a few weeks before circulating this email. Instead, he called on faculty to be civil in the face of potentially radical transformations of our work/lives, as the values on which we have bet our own and our students' futures are rendered obsolete. Perhaps he too is reeling, as many of us are. I questioned the potential chilling effect of such calls for civility. The President responded briefly from the floor of the meeting and more fully in a personal email message to me two

days later. It was unclear whether his message invited a response from me or foreclosed one. I responded anyway. He did not reply.

The President is now reconsidering whether he will continue to give this traditional end-of-the-year address. All the while, Organizational Announcements pop into our inboxes—new vice president positions; the promotion of a vice president to provost; the promotion of a dean to associate vice president and of a director to dean; searches fail and are cancelled; faculty salaries are re-purposed—for what, no one can quite say. Recommendations from faculty who run programs, including those of us who run writing programs, are met with a thin Fairfield line about “the institution’s best interests” and a corrective that we are somehow not the ones from whom such recommendations should or will come.

As a university leader during a time of rapid organizational change, I played and will continue to play my own role in complex decisions. I do not exempt myself as an actor in these institutional scripts, neither as someone who experienced nor as someone who inflicted pain. Even now, I am interim co-director of a core writing program that took more than a decade to build and may well be significantly re-organized during my term while the permanent director is on leave. None of us is in an enviable position. As our institutions shape and shift, we all struggle to make sense of these changes. Perhaps pain is an inevitable part of that picture. If so, we can at least acknowledge that it is simultaneously regrettable. We can gesture toward healing. We can speak to each other’s humanity.

I joke that it took me a year’s worth of General Faculty meetings to realize that, when we call the question, we actually stop talking about the issue. The calling of the question seemed to me to be just the beginning. I know now that in many ways it is just the beginning, that many questions still follow the calling.

As I put the finishing touches on this plenary address, I participated in a workshop for the Connecticut Writing Project. Our CWP director tweeted out a photo of our group, and it was re-tweeted by “Fairfield University.” That night in my inbox was a message from a long-ago-graduated student, Gary. I supervised his Honors project, which explored, among other things, the concept of the trace and the question of remains. Through that project, we first encountered Sally Mann’s work when we took a field trip to the Houk Gallery in New York City for an exhibition. It was prescient work to be doing when Gary’s father passed away later that year, only a few weeks shy of Gary’s graduation from Fairfield. The message that arrived in my inbox reads, “i’m sitting down, kids asleep, light up my computer to do a few last things, and run across a tweet featuring you. for a brief moment

i flash back to this very special time where questions were as valuable as answers. what a rare thing.”⁵



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NOTES

1. Mann’s style is haunting and indistinct. My own snapshots lack clarity, especially in print reproduction, because I am unskilled, but I present them here for what they echo of her work. Information about Sally Mann can be found on her website: sallymann.com.

2. *Central administrators* is admittedly a slippery category. I use it here to designate administrators who have significant decision-making authority and whose responsibilities do not involve routine contact with students.

3. See, for example, the Fairfield University Institutional Progress Report submitted to the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) in

2009 that responds to the NEASC Evaluation Team's assessment that governance is "a concern for the university" (4).

4. Here I acknowledge Cheryl Ball who used the phrase *mission creep* during her plenary address at the 2015 CWPA conference to describe this phenomenon.

5. Original formatting preserved.

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